




The Process of Meaning Formation in Adolescents: A Grounded Theory

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The present study aimed to explore the process of meaning formation in adolescents.

Methods: The research method was qualitative and utilized a grounded theory approach. The research population consisted of adolescents aged 12–20 years in Isfahan, Iran. Sampling was conducted theoretically. Nine participants were included in the study, and data collection was carried out through semi-structured interviews. The data analysis process followed Glaser's (1987) methodology. At the end of the coding stages, the final model of the study was presented.

Findings: The results revealed that meaning formation in adolescents occurs through five stages: the occurrence of conflict (a triggering event), expression of conflict (problematic coping with a painful and damaging context, emotional confusion, and protesting against meaning), confrontation with conflict (addressing unclear feelings, focusing on core pain (self-awareness), and developing acceptance capacity), processing conflict (recalling the experience, exploring, expanding and deepening, gaining insight into unmet needs, and processing and accepting one's and others' experiences), and the emergence of resolution and achieving integration (softening and adopting a new perspective, manifesting agency (decision-making), generating experience, and integrating with prior experiences).

Conclusion: Based on the findings, it can be inferred that meaning formation in adolescents occurs as a process. Therefore, it can be concluded that the journey toward finding meaning is not a fixed or instantaneous event but a continuous and evolving process shaped by various experiences and reflections. This process unfolds as a series of interrelated stages, reflecting a dynamic and transformative approach to navigating and understanding significant life changes. This structured delineation of stages provides valuable insights into how individuals actively engage with and create meaning when encountering transformative moments.

Keywords: *Meaning, Conflict, Adolescent, Meaning Formation.*

1. Introduction

The fundamental concern of humanity revolves around questions such as: Who am I? Where have I come from? Where am I headed? What is the path to fulfillment? The question of the meaning of life is an essential feature of human existence. Being a thinking and questioning being, humans naturally inquire about the reasons for their existence. The emergence of such questions is neither incidental nor external but one of the hallmarks of authentic and serious living (Heidegger, 1962). Humans possess the unique ability to integrate life experiences and events to extract meaning from them (Glaw et al., 2017). This drive toward meaning serves as a mechanism through which individuals strive to create stability in an otherwise unstable life (Li et al., 2021).

Numerous psychologists have explored the concept of meaning, among whom Viktor Frankl (1984) is recognized as a pioneer in this field. Frankl does not confine the meaning of life to specific domains such as altruism, achievement, or fame. Instead, he believes that the quest for personal meaning begins through a search process and may culminate over time (Steger, 2012). Steger and colleagues (2009) have also pointed to two important dimensions of meaning in life in their theory. The first dimension concerns individuals' perceptions of meaning and purpose in life, referred to as the "presence of meaning," while the second dimension pertains to the extent of individuals' engagement in the "search for meaning in life" (Park, 2016, 2017; Steger et al., 2009).

In general, theories of meaning and meaning-making often address two levels of meaning: global and situational. Global meaning refers to individuals' belief systems about the world, themselves, and their overarching goals, along with the associated feelings and thoughts about life's meaning or purpose (Park, 2016). In other words, global beliefs constitute core schemas through which individuals interpret their experiences (Koltko-Rivera, 2004), encompassing beliefs about justice, control, predictability, and the self (Leary & Tangney, 2013). Global goals represent internal representations of desired processes, events, or outcomes (Austin & Vancouver, 1996; Bardach et al., 2020). These goals may reflect ultimate desirable states or existing conditions individuals strive to maintain (Hoyle & Davison, 2018). Feelings and thoughts related to meaning fundamentally denote a sense of "meaningfulness," including emotional significance, understanding, and

connectedness with life and existence (Baumeister & Landau, 2018; Baumeister & Vohs, 2002).

Situational meaning, by contrast, arises in the context of specific environmental encounters. It pertains to how individuals perceive, interpret, or make sense of a specific event or situation. For instance, the framework of meaning-making in the context of life events indicates that encountering severe stressors often leads to situational evaluations that disrupt individuals' global meanings (Park, 2010). In the meaning-making framework, discrepancies or violations play a pivotal role in initiating and sustaining the meaning-making process. For example, although individual differences exist, people generally believe their lives are predictable, orderly, and meaningful, and that the world is coherent, fair, or just (Furnham, 2021).

One of the major frameworks for examining meaning appears to be developmental theories, such as Erikson's (1968) and Marcia's (1980) theories (Damon et al., 2019; Yoon et al., 2021). Although these theories are not primarily concerned with meaning, they suggest that changes in goals and perspectives occur alongside life transitions and passages (Negru-Subtirica et al., 2016). From this perspective, the genesis of meaning development may be observed in the fifth stage of Erikson's developmental model (1968), during the conflict of identity versus role confusion (Hupkens et al., 2018). Redcuppe (1990) acknowledges that this phase of identity formation is vital for future meaning development, as an individual must first define their sense of self before constructing personal purpose and meaning (Itzick et al., 2018). Essentially, the most significant developmental tasks during these formative years involve crafting a personal worldview and developing an identity (Brassai et al., 2012).

Adolescence is widely recognized as a critical and pivotal period for personality development (Blakemore, 2019). Many physiological, psychological, and social changes occur during this life stage (Lotf-Abadi, 2014). Adolescents experience greater psychological turmoil and struggles compared to childhood and engage more intensely in the quest for self-meaning (Rathi & Rastogi, 2007). Possessing meaning and purpose can aid in resolving the identity crises that adolescents typically encounter during this time (Pavai et al., 2021; Pirhadi Tavandashti et al., 2024). Some researchers view the search for meaning as a facilitator of identity development in adolescents (Brassai et al., 2012).

Developmental theories (Erikson, 1968) emphasize that exploration and discovery, driven by the need to determine identity, career, and social roles, are hallmark characteristics

of adolescence and early adulthood (Yoon et al., 2021). These theories suggest that younger age groups report higher levels of meaning-seeking compared to older adults (Damon et al., 2019).

Brassai et al. (2012) conducted a study on adolescents aged 15–18, revealing that the search for meaning significantly influences their behaviors. The study found that both the presence of and search for meaning were predictive of reduced violent behavior, antisocial tendencies, and educational irresponsibility among adolescents (Brassai et al., 2012). In other words, an increased sense of meaning not only helps adolescents overcome challenging situations but also enhances personal satisfaction and self-sufficiency (Kim et al., 2005).

Research by Dietman et al. (1999) demonstrated significant differences in personal meaning systems between youth and the elderly (Dittmann-Kohli & Westerhof, 1999). Most of these studies focused not on the construct of life meaning but rather on life goals, implying meaning-related considerations (Bronk et al., 2010). Nonetheless, previous research has often overlooked adolescence in investigating sources and dimensions of meaning. A case study by Hamzeh-Gardeshi et al. (2019) showed that factors such as mental health, identity styles, life expectancy, religion, and social connections significantly contribute to achieving meaning in life for adolescents (Hamzeh-Gardeshi et al., 2019). Moreover, Orangi et al. (2018) found significant differences in meaning-related components, such as self-acceptance, positive relationships with others, personal growth, and purposeful living, among age groups 17–25, 26–46, and 65–80. These findings suggest that age is a factor influencing life meaning and psychological well-being (Orangi et al., 2018).

Ahmadi et al. (2016) reported that, among life meaning sources identified through the Meaning in Life Assessment, family, social connections, and work/education were the most frequently cited by adolescents as contributors to life meaning (Ahmadi et al., 2016). Glaw et al. (2020) demonstrated significant variations in identity processes among adolescents based on their level of meaning formation (Glaw et al., 2017). Similarly, Testoni et al. (2018) explored the relationship between life meaning, death representations, and psychological distress (Testoni et al., 2018), while Krause (2005) showed that traumatic events influence life meaning, with psychological trauma in ages 18–30 associated with reduced meaning perception (Krause, 2005). Emotional support was found to mitigate these impacts (Toussaint et al., 2017). Rovenpor et al. (2019)

further revealed that exposure to intergroup conflict increases meaning and strengthens the desire for greater engagement (Rovenpor et al., 2019).

Steger and Park (2012) investigated meaning creation following trauma, examining meaning-making pathways of distress and recovery (Steger, 2012). Vieveen et al. (2023) studied meaning-making in widows following spousal loss during the COVID-19 pandemic (Vieveen et al., 2023). Harrop et al. (2017) examined meaning-making in advanced illnesses (Harrop et al., 2017), and Hedayati and Khazaei (2014) analyzed the relationship between depression, meaning in life, and hope in adulthood (Hedayati & Khazaei, 2014). Meanwhile, Marco et al. (2016) found that meaning in life mediated the relationship between suicide risk factors and hopelessness in individuals with mental disorders. In alignment with these findings (Marco et al., 2016), Sun et al. (2022) concluded that meaning in life acts as a mediator between depression, hopelessness, and suicidal ideation (Sun et al., 2022). Similarly, Chen et al. (2020) showed that perceived meaning in life mediates the link between rejection and suicidal thoughts (Chen et al., 2020).

Finally, Vos (2016) highlighted the role of meaning as a motivator, encompassing values, comprehension, self-worth, purpose-driven goals, and self-regulation. Most people in stressful situations ask meaning-related questions, and focusing on meaning aids in coping with such conditions (Vos, 2016).

Although the framework for meaning-making is widely accepted, empirical findings regarding this framework remain mixed, with limited or no support for many propositions about meaning (Park, 2010). Moreover, assessing meaning-making processes has proven challenging. Ultimately, addressing the process by which adolescents construct meaning based on self-authorship appears crucial. Understanding this process can inspire novel educational and developmental structures to guide adolescents toward growth and creativity.

Violation of global meaning serves as a precursor to cognitive processing or meaning-making efforts. Since every individual possesses a semantic system shaping their worldview, any attempt to modify or reinterpret it may involve challenges to their system. Meaning-making efforts signify attempts to create or alter meanings related to one's actual experiences (Park, 2013). Most research on meaning has been conducted within Western cultures, with limited studies addressing meaning in the context of Iranian culture, despite cultural influences on this construct (Steger et al., 2008).

Furthermore, previous studies primarily examined life meaning and its dimensions, while the central focus of the present study is on the process of meaning-making. Prior research has primarily addressed meaning within adult populations, leaving a significant gap in understanding meaning-making during adolescence. Additionally, limited studies have explored meaning-making processes in critical life junctures such as events or illnesses (Fivush et al., 2017; Park, 2016), limiting their generalizability to normal life conditions. Therefore, this study aims to address the process of meaning-making in the ordinary lives of adolescents, contributing a novel step toward filling the gaps in existing research. Specifically, the study seeks to answer the question: What is the process of meaning-making in adolescents?

2. Methods

The present study employed a qualitative approach and utilized grounded theory for its execution. Grounded theory encompasses a set of techniques designed for conducting qualitative research. The study population comprised male and female adolescents aged 12–20 years in Isfahan, Iran, during 2022. Participants were selected voluntarily through theoretical sampling based on inclusion criteria. Adolescents willing to participate were eligible if they scored above 24 on the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (Steger, 2010). Additionally, consistent with Erikson's (1963) framework, the age range of 12–20 years was classified as adolescence. Participants who, based on diagnostic interviews conducted by the researcher, were suspected of having clinical or personality disorders were excluded from the study.

Data collection and sampling continued until all categories and components were saturated, with additional categories or components included afterward. Since theoretical sampling involves building interpretive theories by integrating data and selecting new samples to test and construct these theories, the researcher selected participants as the theory evolved. Selection was based on increasing interest; hence, nine semi-structured interviews were conducted with male and female adolescents aged 12–20 years. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes.

The interview questions were designed after reviewing the research literature and consulting with experts to ensure a coherent structure. Interviews began with broad, general questions, such as discussing impactful life events ("Has anything happened in your life that disrupted its normal course and rendered your previous strategies and thoughts

ineffective?"). Subsequently, more detailed and in-depth questions followed (e.g., "What was your life like before the event? How did the event impact you? What changes occurred in your life after the event? Can you share details of the incident? Can you describe your emotional experience?"). The sequence of questions depended on the interview process and each participant's responses, and it was not uniform for all participants.

All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim immediately after recording. Data analysis was conducted based on Glaser's (1987) method, encompassing seven stages: open coding, selective coding, memo writing, sorting, theoretical coding, literature review, and theory writing. Open coding began after the first interview, yielding fundamental codes (categories and their properties). At this stage, the data were read line by line, and a label was assigned to each portion (a word, line, or paragraph). These portions were considered incidents, which collectively formed a concept. While examining incidents, questions such as "What category does this incident represent?" and "What property of the category does this incident illustrate?" were consistently asked. Ultimately, the primary concern of the participants was identified.

Simultaneously, the constant comparative method was employed. Each key point was treated as an incident, which was then elevated to a higher conceptual level. Finally, one of the open codes was selected as the core category. Selective coding focused solely on the core category and its related categories, while unrelated data were excluded. Subsequent sampling aimed to develop the theory ("Who should I interview next to gain more insights?"). Selective coding continued until the core category and related categories were saturated.

Throughout the study, memos were written to capture the researcher's ideas about concepts, properties, and their interrelations. These memos facilitated the development of hypotheses regarding the relationships among categories and properties, ultimately aiding in theory construction. After saturation, the memos were sorted to provide an overarching theoretical framework for the grounded theory. Theoretical coding, which conceptualizes the relationships among categories, occurred during the sorting and integration of memos. Open and selective coding focused on categorizing and fragmenting the data, while theoretical codes linked the concepts.

Two key principles of classical grounded theory regarding literature review were observed: (a) refraining from reviewing the literature of the core domain during the

research process and (b) deferring the literature review until the theory’s development was nearing completion. However, studying specialized texts from other fields during the research was beneficial, enhancing the researcher’s theoretical sensitivity in conceptualizing and theoretically coding the data (Glaser, 1992, as cited in Farhangi et al., 2015). The literature of the core domain was primarily reviewed for comparison with findings, treating the existing literature as a set of ideas rather than absolute facts. Reading literature at the outset risked affirming existing theories and hindering the discovery of new insights. Ultimately, the research culminated in writing the theory.

Based on the analysis, the study addressed the research question: “What is the process of meaning formation in adolescents?” The findings were synthesized into a grounded theory model. Participant manuscripts were reviewed for coding clarity, ensuring the validity of the data. Credibility was ensured through systematic data collection, researcher neutrality, member checks for agreement on interviews, codes, and categories, and aligning the researcher’s interpretation with participant intent.

Additionally, the findings were reviewed and approved by two faculty members specializing in psychology. Reliability was enhanced through transcription, peer feedback, revisiting the entire dataset, and ensuring transferability through diverse participant interviews, direct quotations, illustrative examples, and rich data explanation.

As screening tool, the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (Steger, 2006) measures two dimensions of life meaning: the presence of meaning and the search for meaning, using 10 items rated on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (completely untrue) to 7 (completely true). This questionnaire was validated by Majdabadi (2017). Scores above 24 on the presence dimension and above 24 on the search dimension indicate an individual who feels their life has meaningful purpose and actively explores that meaning.

Scores above 24 on the presence dimension but below 24 on the search dimension indicate an individual who feels their life has purpose but does not actively examine or seek meaning. Scores below 24 on the presence dimension and above 24 on the search dimension suggest someone who feels their life lacks meaningful purpose but actively seeks something or someone to provide meaning. Scores below 24 on both dimensions indicate an individual who perceives their life as lacking meaningful purpose and does not actively explore or seek meaning. Items 1, 4, 5, 6, and 9 assess the presence of meaning. For scoring, the rating for item 9 is subtracted from item 8 and added to items 1, 2, 5, and 6, yielding a range of 5–35. Items 2, 3, 7, 8, and 10 assess the search for meaning, with scores derived by summing the ratings of these items, also ranging from 5–35. Studies support the reliability and validity of the questionnaire, with strong internal consistency (α coefficients between 0.82 and 0.87) and test-retest reliability over one month (0.70 for the presence subscale and 0.73 for the search subscale) (Steger & Shin, 2010; Steger et al., 2006).

3. Findings and Results

The mean age of the participants was 17.22 years, with a standard deviation of 1.39. The sample consisted of six females and three males; eight were high school students, and one was a university student. In response to the first research question, “How does meaning formation occur in adolescents?”, the analysis of participants’ experiences yielded 120 open codes, 13 selective codes, and 5 theoretical codes. Based on the interview analyses, five stages of meaning formation in adolescents were identified: occurrence of conflict, expression of conflict, confrontation with conflict, processing conflict, and emergence of resolution and achieving integration. Table 1 provides the open, selective, and theoretical codes for these stages.

Table 1

Open, Selective, and Theoretical Codes for the Process of Meaning Formation in Adolescents

Open Coding	Selective Coding	Theoretical Coding
Experiencing a significant event, decreased academic performance, occurrence of a shocking event, relationship failure, loss of motivation source, ending a friendship, sudden separation from a loved one, experiencing the death of a family member, experiencing severe illness in a family member.	A triggering event	Creation of conflict
Attempting distraction, trying to forget the event, despair in others, deciding to eliminate the source of distress, choosing personal confrontation with the issue.	Problematic coping with a painful and damaging context	Expression of conflict
Emotional agitation, loss of control, hopelessness, dealing with various doubts.	Emotional confusion	
Seeking reasons for the event, forming various questions and mental concerns, fatigue from carrying a heavy burden, constant reflection on the events.	Protesting against meaning	

Attempting to identify the factors causing distress, feeling a lack of control over life, seeking help from others, trying to understand the underlying meanings of emotions.	Addressing unclear feelings and core pain (self-awareness)	Confrontation with conflict
Neutral assessment of the issue, internal dialogue to accept the event, analyzing others' behavior, reflecting on the situation, difficulty accepting reality.	Developing acceptance capacity	
Recalling and rethinking the experience, occasional reflection on the experience, connecting previous similar experiences to the current one.	Recalling experience	Processing conflict
Exploring the issue from different dimensions, connecting new and past events, synthesizing experiences to create meaning.	Exploration, expansion, and deepening	
Concerns about losing close relationships, separation, unmet needs, failure to achieve goals.	Insight into unmet needs	
Understanding the causes and reasoning behind others' behaviors, taking responsibility, understanding others' conditions and experiences.	Processing and accepting one's and others' experiences	
Critiquing previous strategies for addressing issues, developing new interpretations of the experience, accepting uncontrollable matters, constructing new inferences for coping, and synthesizing insights through reflection.	Softening and adopting a new perspective	Emergence of resolution and achieving integration
Using imagination to evoke new emotions, altering behaviors compared to the past, feeling positive about one's performance, pride in personal actions, gaining a sense of direction, deciding to act differently, receiving emotional and empathetic support from parents and family.	Self-repair, manifestation (decision-making), and creating experiences	
Integrating the new experience with previous ones, reflecting on the acquired meaning as part of past experiences, dismantling outdated emotional and behavioral patterns, constructing new narratives from the experience.	Integrating with prior experiences	

3.1. Context: Creation of Conflict

The core theoretical code, Creation of Conflict, describes the initiation of meaning formation in adolescents as beginning with the emergence of conflict. According to the study findings, individuals begin engaging in the meaning formation process when confronted with shocking and unimaginable events or issues, placing them in a state of dealing with the event or issue. This core theoretical code includes one selective code: "Occurrence of a Triggering Event."

Occurrence of a Triggering Event: This selective code describes the events or issues that acted as a mental spark for the adolescents in this study, leading to emotional reactions. For example, one participant stated:

"An event happened to my brother, and a year later, my grandmother passed away. That was the turning point where I can divide my life into before and after. Before the incident, my life was peaceful." (Participant 1).

3.2. Causal Conditions: Expression of Conflict

The core theoretical code, Expression of Conflict, includes three selective codes: "Problematic Coping with a Painful and Damaging Context," "Emotional Confusion," and "Protesting Against Meaning." It describes how, after experiencing conflict, the adolescents sought ways to express and reveal their inner conflict related to the event or issue.

Problematic Coping with a Painful and Damaging Context: Following life-changing events, the adolescents' first reaction was to cope with the incident and regain self-

control. They employed various strategies, including trying to forget the event, severing ties with the source of distress, or deciding to address problems independently without seeking help. For example, one participant said:

"At first, I'd say, 'If you can stop thinking about it for a moment, I'll reward you.' But during that moment when I was trying not to think about it, I was already thinking about it." (Participant 4).

Emotional Confusion: Emotional confusion reflects the adolescents' emotional reactions to significant events or issues. These reactions included feelings of distress, sadness, fatigue, anger, helplessness, and loneliness. Participants often reported feeling a loss of control over their lives and doubting whether things could improve. For example:

"It was the first time I felt an overwhelming emptiness. I didn't even know why this feeling came over me—it felt like something wanted to burst inside my chest." (Participant 2).

Protesting Against Meaning: Adolescents also expressed their conflict by questioning why the event occurred, particularly why it happened to them. They reported experiencing mental turmoil, blaming themselves, feeling upset with others, and pondering unanswered questions. For instance:

"I kept thinking, 'Why did this happen? Why do I feel this way?' I was angry with myself and others and felt a heavy burden on my shoulders." (Participant 4).

3.3. Correlated Causes with the Core Process: Confrontation with Conflict

The core theoretical code, Confrontation with Conflict, describes how adolescents moved from expressing conflict through emotional reactions and questioning meaning to

actively confronting their conflict. This confrontation was crucial for understanding and addressing their emotions, ultimately enabling acceptance.

Addressing Unclear Feelings and Core Pain (Self-Awareness): Adolescents began to explore and understand the emotions and pain they had experienced. One participant said:

"I was scared because I felt like I had lost control over my life. I wasn't okay because I wasn't performing well. I started to recognize the factors causing my distress and worked to accept them and seek help." (Participant 6).

Developing Acceptance Capacity: Adolescents engaged in neutral assessments of events, analyzed their own and others' behaviors, and used inner dialogues to process and accept the situation. For example:

"It was tough to admit how much I cared about my friend and how their actions had upset me and changed my situation." (Participant 4).

3.4. *Causes: Processing Conflict*

In the Processing Conflict stage, adolescents progressed beyond the initial shock, reflected on their experiences, and sought deeper understanding. This stage facilitated acceptance and prepared them to integrate the experience into their lives.

Recalling Experience: Adolescents revisited their memories, reflecting on past experiences to gain insight. For example:

"My mother passed away in 2015 when I was 13. Now, after my grandmother's death, I realize how dependent I was on her. I haven't fully come to terms with my grandmother's passing, but it's made me reflect more on my mother's death." (Participant 1).

Exploration, Expansion, and Deepening: After recalling their experiences, adolescents thought deeply about their feelings, unmet needs, and unresolved issues. This introspection allowed them to process and accept their own and others' experiences.

"It took me years after those events to realize how they affected me and why I reacted the way I did in 2019." (Participant 2).

Insight into Unmet Needs: Adolescents identified unfulfilled needs that contributed to their distress, such as failed relationships or unmet cultural expectations. For instance:

"I always tried to be a good friend, but in this culture, I couldn't reach them. My intentions were good, but my needs weren't met." (Participant 3).

Processing and Accepting Own and Others' Experiences: Adolescents considered multiple perspectives, compared their views with others, and sought to reconcile differences. For example:

"If we lived in another country, parents wouldn't interfere so much in relationships. It's frustrating, but I'm learning to accept it." (Participant 3).

3.5. *Outcome: Emergence of Resolution and Achieving Integration*

In the final stage, Emergence of Resolution and Achieving Integration, adolescents explored new perspectives, embraced acceptance, and sought solutions to incorporate their experiences into their lives.

Softening and Adopting a New Perspective: Adolescents displayed greater flexibility and openness, gaining a sense of control and adopting new outlooks. For example:

"I didn't used to care about these things, but now I understand relationships and emotions better. It's like taking risks—greater effort brings greater rewards." (Participant 3).

Self-Repair, Agency Manifestation, and Creating Experiences: Adolescents regained a sense of agency, made new decisions, and sought fresh experiences.

"It felt good to look back and be proud of myself for how I handled things at that time." (Participant 6).

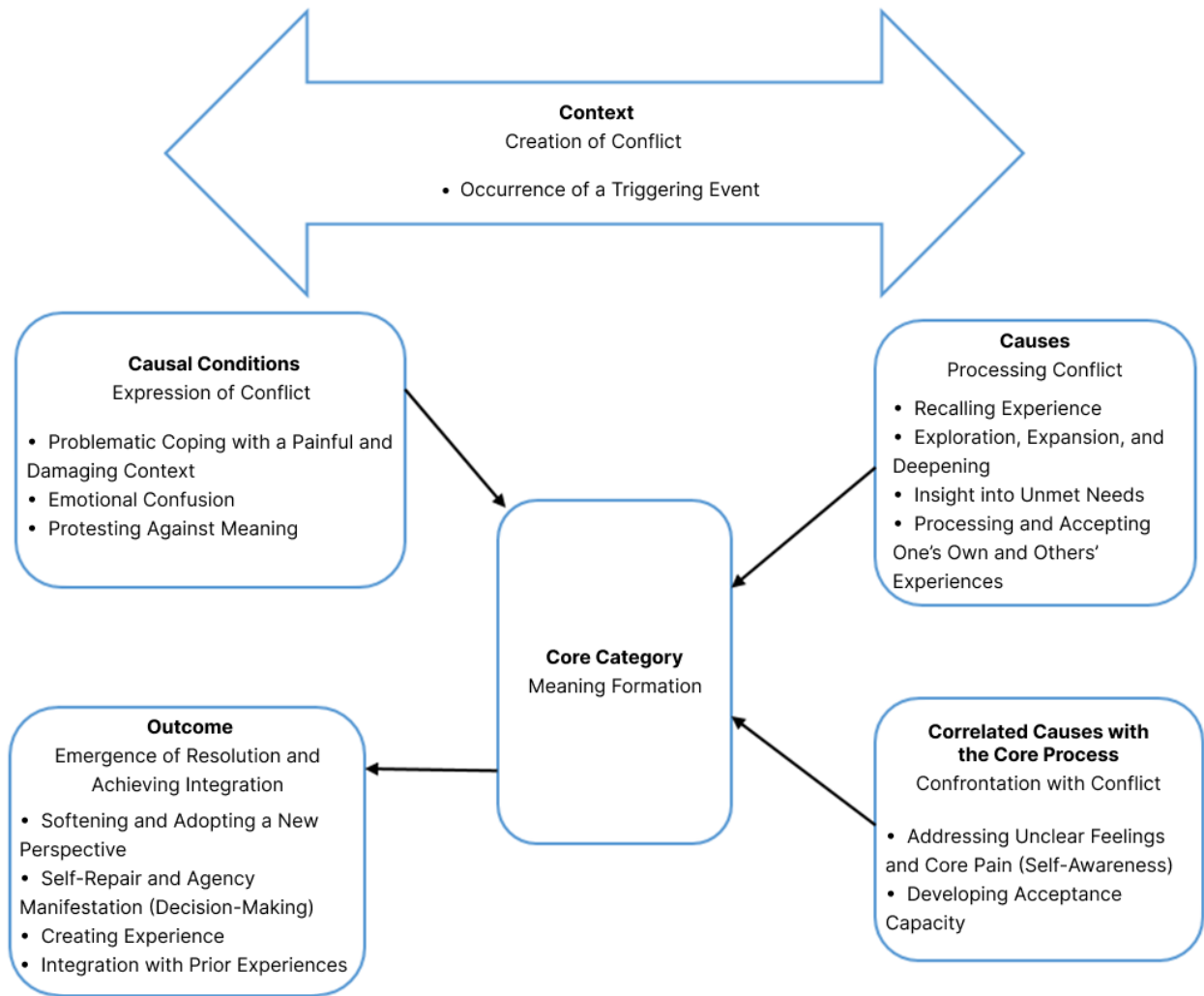
Integrating with Prior Experiences: Adolescents reconciled their past experiences with new ones, creating meaningful narratives and embracing change.

"It's fascinating to realize how much you can love someone. It's a unique experience that changes you." (Participant 3).

The below model illustrates the interconnected stages and processes through which adolescents construct meaning, highlighting the dynamic journey from conflict to integration.

Figure 1

The Model of Meaning Formation in Adolescents



4. Discussion and Conclusion

This study aimed to explore the stages involved in the process of meaning formation in adolescents. Using Glaser’s grounded theory method (1987), six stages of meaning formation emerged from the findings: (1) creation of conflict, (2) expression of conflict, (3) confrontation with conflict, (4) processing conflict, (5) emergence of resolution, and (6) achieving integration.

As previously noted, the first stage, creation of conflict, included the selective codes: "occurrence of a triggering event" and "problematic coping with a painful and damaging context." Studies (Harrop et al., 2017; Park, 2017; Park & Ai, 2006; Steger & Park, 2012; Testoni et al., 2018; Toussaint et al., 2017; Vieveen et al., 2023) implicitly support this finding. Survivors of disasters often cope through meaning-making (Park & Ai, 2006). Active problem-solving, emotional regulation, and seeking social

support are effective strategies following disasters (Wadsworth et al., 2009), suggesting that meaning-making is often the best or only path to recovery from profound loss (Park, 2010). Meaning-making frequently involves reassessing or reframing the significance of the event to align it with global beliefs, reducing discrepancies between the individual’s evaluation of the event and their worldview.

One key approach to meaning-making is re-evaluating or reframing a stressful situation to perceive it as less threatening and more congruent with global beliefs. Such strategies are particularly effective in managing ongoing stressors (Aldwin, 2011). Longitudinal studies, such as Nygard and Heir’s (2012) research on Norwegian tourists who survived the 2004 tsunami, document changes in global beliefs (e.g., about justice, predictability, and control) following disasters. Negative shifts in these beliefs correlated with lower quality of life and higher PTSD symptoms two years later.

The second stage, expression of conflict, involved the selective codes: "emotional confusion" and "protesting against meaning." Studies (Hedayati & Khazaei, 2014; King & Pennebaker, 2013; Marco et al., 2016; Parra, 2020; Sun et al., 2022) provide implicit support for this finding. Emotional and cognitive confusion, characterized by causal or utilitarian attributions (e.g., "Why did this happen?" or "What is the purpose?"), plays a central role in meaning-making. Adolescents facing such conflicts attempt to reconcile their prior and current identities, reducing internal tension and fostering a sense of personal growth and stability.

The third stage, confrontation with conflict, included the selective codes: "addressing unclear feelings and core pain (self-awareness)" and "developing acceptance capacity." This stage is supported by studies (Chen et al., 2020; Schwarz, 2010; Vos, 2016). Acceptance as an ongoing process helps individuals manage the necessary changes in various life domains. Addressing unclear feelings reflects ambivalence and challenges in integrating meaning. Acceptance entails recognizing and acknowledging that suffering does not cease and learning to live with it while seeking external support. Schwarz (2010) emphasized that this process involves returning to life with renewed purpose, highlighting the importance of flexibility and adaptation (Schwarz, 2010).

The fourth stage, processing conflict, involved the selective codes: "recalling experience," "exploration, expansion, and deepening," "insight into unmet needs," and "processing and accepting one's own and others' experiences." This finding aligns with prior research (Krause, 2005; Rovenpor et al., 2019; Rowe, 2005; Schwarz, 2010; Toussaint et al., 2017; Vos, 2016). Meaning-making is a lifelong process of alternating stability and transformation triggered by crises. Processing conflict often involves revisiting experiences, prioritizing values and goals, and reflecting on existential questions, fostering personal growth and well-being (Rich & Taylor, 2000). For instance, Taylor's (1983) research on survivors of traumatic events emphasized meaning-making as a critical component of coping and psychological recovery (Taylor, 1983).

Furthermore, processing conflict can be understood through the lens of resilience (West et al., 2012). Resilience supports individuals in managing prolonged suffering by recognizing personal strength, accepting suffering as a reality, and focusing on positive aspects of life. Building capacity for acceptance emerged as a potential but challenging process, consistent with Merleau-Ponty's

(2004) view that re-establishing contact with the world enables self-reconnection (Merleau-Ponty, 2004). Similarly, Bullington (2009) argued that redefining and accepting oneself helps individuals integrate new routines, fostering meaning-making in their lives (Bullington, 2009).

The fifth stage of meaning formation in adolescents, Emergence of Resolution and Achieving Integration, included the selective codes: softening and adopting a new perspective, self-repair and agency manifestation (decision-making), and creating experience. Studies (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1999; Glaw et al., 2017; Otto et al., 2006; Triplett et al., 2012; Vos, 2016) implicitly support these findings.

This stage involves enhanced understanding of life's value, altered life priorities, development of close and warm relationships, recognition of one's abilities, discovery of new pathways, and spiritual transformation (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1999). A deeper appreciation for life, coupled with a changed perception of what is truly important, is a significant aspect of those who have faced major life struggles. Jordan (2001) observed that even the smallest pleasures take on special meaning, often reported as a transformative change in perspective.

Such changes in priorities often include increased appreciation for previously overlooked aspects of life, such as a child's smile or spending quality time with family. Close relationships can play a pivotal role in post-traumatic growth (Groleau et al., 2013), as does recognizing possibilities and choosing new paths. Spiritual and existential growth are other pathways through which individuals experience positive changes while coping with stress and loss. Even individuals who are not religious or who deny the existence of God can experience growth by grappling with existential questions and their relationship with themselves (Triplett et al., 2012).

Components of this theory have received empirical support. Park and Folkman (1997) distinguished between global and situational meaning-making. Global meaning refers to enduring beliefs and valued goals, while situational meaning arises from the interaction between global meanings and specific circumstances. Traumatic events challenge an individual's global values, initiating a process of meaning-making to integrate situational meanings. This can involve adapting schemas to accommodate situational meanings or redefining global beliefs in light of the new perspective. Many theorists highlight the critical role of meaning-making in responding to traumatic events (Park & Folkman, 1997).

Davis et al. (2007) interpret post-traumatic growth as a form of meaning-making, focusing on causal attributions ("Why did this happen?") and utilitarian attributions ("For what purpose?"). According to this conceptualization, personal growth perceptions may reflect a utilitarian attribution (Davis et al., 2007). Taylor and Armor (1996) propose the theory of positive illusion, suggesting that individuals facing sudden, adverse events strive to maintain internal stability by reconstructing their identity and reducing tension (Taylor & Armor, 1996). Otto et al. (2006) assert that positive illusions act as psychological buffers, helping individuals adapt to severe circumstances, often creating a sense of growth that is more emotional than behavioral (Otto et al., 2006).

Schaffer et al. (1992) identified determinants of positive outcomes in their conceptual framework on life crises, distinguishing between personal factors (e.g., self-efficacy, optimism, flexibility) and environmental factors (e.g., social support, family relationships). These factors shape cognitive appraisal processes and coping responses, determining the crisis outcome (Schaefer & Moos, 1992; Schaefer & Coleman, 1992). Event-related factors, such as intensity, duration, and timing, also play critical roles.

The findings indicate that meaning formation in adolescents occurs as a dynamic process rather than a singular event. While individuals may perceive that "nothing is the same anymore," meaning formation unfolds as an ongoing evolution, shaped by diverse experiences and reflections. The identified stages underscore the complex, multifaceted journey toward meaning-making, emphasizing a dynamic and transformative approach to navigating life's significant changes.

This structured process offers valuable psychological insights into how adolescents actively interact with transformative moments, ultimately fostering resilience and personal growth.

5. Suggestions and Limitations

This study, like others, has limitations. Researcher bias may have influenced the findings, necessitating caution in generalizing the results. The sample was limited to adolescents in Isfahan, Iran, making it necessary to approach generalizations across different communities and age groups cautiously. The study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, which presented challenges for conducting in-person interviews; some interviews were conducted virtually. Coordinating with participants during the

pandemic also posed challenges. Additionally, the philosophical and abstract nature of the construct of meaning limited access to contemporary resources.

Future research should replicate this study in other communities and compare the results across cultures and age groups. It is also recommended to develop educational and therapeutic programs for meaning-making and assess their impact on variables such as identity styles and goal orientation. Future studies should aim for in-person interviews for richer data collection and explore the drivers of engagement in adolescents' lives, such as the roles of identity, peer influence, and social expectations in creating conflict. Examining cultural and individual differences in expressing conflict through verbal, written, and nonverbal communication is another avenue for research.

Future studies should also investigate factors affecting the integration of meanings related to conflict into adolescents' identities. Researchers could explore adolescents who have not yet formed meaning and compare the findings with this study.

The findings suggest the importance of activities focusing on self-awareness, empathy, and emotional regulation to enhance adolescents' ability to express and manage constructive conflicts. Personalized coaching sessions with trained professionals can help adolescents explore and define their values, beliefs, and life goals, fostering a sense of purpose. Establishing mentorship networks to guide and support adolescents through challenges could provide invaluable insights into the meaning-making process.

Authors' Contributions

All authors have contributed significantly to the research process and the development of the manuscript. The article is based on the doctoral thesis of the first author.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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